

The Association Between Picky Eating Behavior and Stunting Among Children Under Five in the Tlogowungu Public Health Center Service Area, Pati Regency

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Abstract. Stunting remains one of the major nutritional problems among children under five years of age in Indonesia and has become a significant public health concern due to its long-term impact on physical growth, cognitive development, and future productivity. One factor associated with stunting is picky eating behavior, which limits children's dietary variety and may result in inadequate nutritional intake. This study aimed to determine the relationship between picky eating behavior and the incidence of stunting among toddlers in Tlogosari Village, Tlogowungu Public Health Center Working Area, Pati Regency. This quantitative study employed a cross-sectional design involving 49 toddlers selected through stratified random sampling. Picky eating behavior was assessed using the Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ), while stunting status was determined based on Height-for-Age measurements according to the World Health Organization (WHO) Child Growth Standards. Data were analyzed using univariate analysis and Fisher's Exact Test. The findings showed that 35 toddlers (71.4%) exhibited picky eating behavior, while 16 toddlers (32.7%) were classified as stunted. Statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting incidence ($p = 0.019$). The study concludes that picky eating behavior is significantly associated with stunting among toddlers. Therefore, parents and healthcare providers should encourage balanced nutrition, healthy eating habits, and regular growth monitoring to reduce the risk of stunting.

Keywords: Picky Eating, Stunting, Toddlers, Nutritional Status, Child Growth.

INTRODUCTION

Stunting is one of the most serious public health and nutritional problems affecting children under five years of age worldwide, particularly in developing countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stunting is defined as impaired linear growth resulting from chronic malnutrition, with a Height-for-Age Z-score (HAZ) below -2 standard deviations. Stunting not only affects children's physical growth but also has long-term consequences on cognitive development, school achievement, immune function, and economic productivity in adulthood. Therefore, reducing the prevalence of stunting has become one of the major priorities of the Indonesian government.

The occurrence of stunting is influenced by various factors, including inadequate nutritional intake, recurrent infectious diseases, poor sanitation, socioeconomic conditions, parental education, and inappropriate feeding practices. Among these factors, children's eating behavior has gained increasing attention because it directly influences dietary intake during the critical period of growth and development. One common eating behavior observed among toddlers is picky eating, which is characterized by food refusal, limited food preferences, and reluctance to try unfamiliar foods. Persistent picky eating may reduce dietary diversity and contribute to nutritional deficiencies.

Several previous studies have reported an association between picky eating behavior and poor nutritional status among children. However, the findings remain inconsistent because some studies reported a significant relationship, while others found no significant association after controlling for other influencing factors such as socioeconomic status, parental knowledge, and recurrent infections. In addition, studies specifically investigating the relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting among toddlers in rural communities of Pati Regency remain limited. This indicates a research gap that requires further investigation.

Considering the increasing prevalence of picky eating behavior among toddlers and its potential impact on child growth, identifying its relationship with stunting is essential for developing effective nutritional intervention strategies. The findings of this study are expected to provide scientific evidence that may support healthcare professionals, particularly nurses and community health workers, in designing educational programs aimed at improving children's dietary habits and preventing stunting.

Therefore, this study aimed to determine the relationship between picky eating behavior and the

incidence of stunting among toddlers in Tlogosari Village, Tlogowungu Public Health Center Working Area, Pati Regency. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of community-based nutritional interventions and strengthen stunting prevention programs implemented by healthcare providers.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional approach to determine the relationship between picky eating behavior and the incidence of stunting among toddlers. The study was conducted in Tlogosari Village, Tlogowungu Public Health Center Working Area, Pati Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, from May to June 2025.

The study population consisted of toddlers aged 1–5 years living in the study area. A total of 49 respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that each subgroup of the population had an equal opportunity to be included in the study.

The independent variable in this study was picky eating behavior, while the dependent variable was stunting incidence. Picky eating behavior was measured using the Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ), whereas stunting status was determined using anthropometric measurements based on the Height-for-Age (HFA) index according to the World Health Organization (WHO) Child Growth Standards.

Data collection was carried out after obtaining permission from the relevant authorities and informed consent from the parents or guardians of the respondents. Parents completed the CEBQ questionnaire, while anthropometric data were collected through height measurements and documentation from the Maternal and Child Health Handbook.

The collected data were processed through editing, coding, data entry, cleaning, and tabulation before statistical analysis. Univariate analysis was performed to describe the distribution of respondents according to picky eating behavior and stunting status. Bivariate analysis was conducted using Fisher's Exact Test with a significance level of 0.05 to determine the relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting incidence. A p-value of less than 0.05 indicated a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

A total of 49 toddlers participated in this study. The respondents were toddlers aged 1–5 years living in Tlogosari Village, Tlogowungu Public Health Center Working Area, Pati Regency. The study focused on identifying the relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting incidence among toddlers.

The univariate analysis showed that 35 toddlers (71.4%) exhibited picky eating behavior, while 14 toddlers (28.6%) did not exhibit picky eating behavior. These findings indicate that picky eating is a common eating behavior among toddlers in the study area and may potentially influence their nutritional intake and growth.

Regarding nutritional status, 16 toddlers (32.7%) were classified as stunted, whereas 33 toddlers (67.3%) had normal height-for-age status. Although the majority of respondents had normal nutritional status, the prevalence of stunting remained relatively high, indicating that chronic nutritional problems continue to exist within the community.

Table 1. Distribution of Picky Eating Behavior among Toddlers

Picky Eating Behavior	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Picky eating	35	71.4
Non picky eating	14	28.6
Total	49	100

Table 2. Distribution of Stunting Incidence among Toddlers

Nutritional Status	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Stunting	16	32.7
Normal	33	67.3
Total	49	100

Relationship Between Picky Eating Behavior and Stunting

The bivariate analysis using Fisher's Exact Test demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting incidence ($p = 0.019$). Among the 35 toddlers who exhibited picky eating behavior, 15 toddlers (42.9%) were classified as stunted. In contrast, among the 14 toddlers without picky eating behavior, only one toddler (7.1%) experienced stunting.

Table 3. Relationship between Picky Eating Behavior and Stunting Incidence

Picky Eating Behavior	Stunting n (%)	Normal n (%)	Total	p-value
Picky eating	15 (42.9)	20 (57.1)	35	0.019
Non picky eating	1 (7.1)	13 (92.9)	14	
Total	16	33	49	

The present study demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting among toddlers. These findings indicate that children who exhibit picky eating behavior are more likely to experience chronic growth disorders than children without such behavior. Picky eating limits dietary diversity and may reduce the intake of essential nutrients, including protein, iron, zinc, calcium, and vitamins, which are crucial for normal growth and development.

The findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that inadequate dietary diversity caused by picky eating contributes to nutritional deficiencies and poor growth outcomes. Children who frequently refuse vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, and other nutrient-rich foods are at greater risk of developing chronic malnutrition, which may eventually lead to stunting.

Nevertheless, stunting is a multifactorial health problem. Besides eating behavior, factors such as parental education, household income, sanitation, recurrent infectious diseases, exclusive breastfeeding practices, complementary feeding, and parenting styles may also influence children's nutritional status. Therefore, comprehensive interventions involving nutrition education, growth monitoring, and parental counseling are required to effectively reduce stunting prevalence.

The novelty of this study lies in its investigation of the relationship between picky eating behavior and stunting among toddlers in Tlogosari Village, an area where limited local evidence has previously been available. The findings provide valuable information for healthcare professionals and community health centers in developing evidence-based nutritional education programs aimed at improving children's eating behavior and preventing

stunting. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of evidence emphasizing the importance of healthy feeding practices during early childhood as part of national stunting prevention strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between picky eating behavior and the incidence of stunting among toddlers in Tlogosari Village, Tlogowungu Public Health Center Working Area, Pati Regency. Toddlers with picky eating behavior were found to have a greater tendency to experience stunting than those without picky eating behavior. These findings indicate that inadequate dietary diversity and insufficient nutritional intake resulting from picky eating behavior may contribute to impaired linear growth among children. Therefore, promoting healthy eating habits, balanced nutrition, and regular growth monitoring through collaboration between parents and healthcare professionals is essential to support optimal child growth and prevent stunting.

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